
CHAPTER 4

Understanding Explicit Instruction

Getting Started with Explicit Instruction

In my youthful, more innocent days as a teacher I honestly thought that when I gave kids good books to read and good questions to answer about those books, that I was *teaching* comprehension. I’ve since figured out that in so doing, I was actually *testing* comprehension. “Good” teaching, which I define as *explicit* teaching, is about much more than just assigning and assessing.

Explicit instruction is more complex than we might wish it to be, which is why good written responses (and other quality student products) often elude us. I was introduced to explicit instruction a couple of decades ago through the work of Madeline Hunter. She referred to this as “teaching for mastery” — a different label for essentially the same concept. Since then, I’ve encountered the explicit teaching model in a variety of forms, and have examined it through the eyes of several scholar-practitioners.

I’ve included an annotated list of a few of my favorite references related to explicit teaching in Part Three, “Resources for Explicit Teaching.” The perspective in each text is unique, but one idea is central to *all* of these sources: Effective instruction requires more than a solid command of the *content*. It is a function of the *process* of teaching, as well. That is, the same basic principles may be applied to teaching a lesson within *any* academic discipline.

The process of explicit teaching in *writing* looks a lot like the process of explicit teaching in *science* or *math*.

Envision these scenarios: You step into a fifth-grade classroom in which children are engaged in an animated discussion of the Holocaust after watching a video clip of interviews with Holocaust survivors; tomorrow they will begin reading their next novel, *Number the Stars* (Lowry). Now, imagine visiting a fourth-grade classroom and watching a teacher give a top-rate explanation of how to determine the topic sentence in a paragraph. You enter another classroom and a teacher is demonstrating fluent oral reading of a poem. In a sixth-grade classroom, you see a teacher distributing a story map for students to complete after reading a literature selection in their basal anthology.

You have just watched teachers:

- Motivate students and build their background knowledge
- Explain a new skill
- Model a quality product
- Provide guided practice

Did you witness effective instruction in each of these classrooms? Used separately, these instructional practices will not get the job done. Used *together*, though, they make a powerful instructional package.

Explicit instruction (also known as “direct instruction”) is a sequence of supports: first *setting a purpose for learning*, then *telling* students what to do, then *showing* them how to do it, and finally *guiding* their hands-on application of the new learning. Explicit instruction begins with **setting the stage for learning**, followed by a clear **explanation** of what to do (telling), followed by **modeling** of the process (showing), followed by multiple opportunities for **practice** (guiding) until independence is attained. Explicit instruction moves systematically from extensive teacher input and little student responsibility initially — to total student responsibility and minimal teacher involvement at the conclusion of the learning cycle.

Setting the Stage for Learning

Instruction should actually begin long before *the lesson*. Diving headlong into the content spells disaster for many students, especially those who struggle with learning. Do they know enough about the topic to build upon that

foundation? Do they know *why* they're reading a particular text? Do they even *care* about this content?

The most logical place for any lesson to begin is by explaining the *purpose* of the activity:

- “Today we are going to work on_____.”
- “By the time we have finished, you will be better at _____.”

Effective teachers then get their kids to *care* about the forthcoming lesson by connecting it to their interests, their background knowledge, the previous day's lesson, or all of the above: “Remember yesterday when we talked about whether *Where the Red Fern Grows* was “good” literature? Remember what a terrific job you did finding proof in the story for your opinions? Well, today I'm going to show you how to organize your response *in writing* so it contains that same great elaboration.”

Explaining: Telling Students What to Do

Once you've identified *what* you're going to accomplish, and *why* it's important to pursue this goal, your next mission is to answer *how*: *How* will you get the job done? Effective teachers present no-frills explanations that give students *just enough* information to cover the basics and get them started on the task. This is one of those times when *less* is *more*. Resist the urge to ramble on about all the fine points of the new skill; there will be plenty of time for that later when the foundation has been built. Also, save for another time those cute little anecdotes about *your* experience learning this skill in the third grade (which will divert their attention from the lesson at hand.)

Most of all, though, refrain from beginning with a warning about how *hard* the new skill will be for students to learn. I have been in so many classrooms where teachers, in an effort to get everyone to listen up, precede their explanation with, “Now, this thing we're going to learn today is very hard, so if you don't pay attention, you're not going to get it.” The only word kids hear in that sentence is *hard*, which causes many of them to tune out right then. They think, “I'll never understand this anyway, so why bother to make the effort.”

A good teacher knows that her job is to provide an explanation that is simple and direct enough to make the learning accessible to *all* of the students in the class. She also knows the power of a positive approach.

- “You won't believe how easy this is going to be...”

- “I can show you an easy way to...”
- “You may be shocked at how quickly you catch on to this...”
- “I’m going to go slowly and help you every step of the way. I promise that I won’t let you get lost.”

Now, students feel empowered to face the challenge of new learning. They feel safe that you are there for them if the going gets rough.

So what does a *good* explanation involve?

- Divide the task into a few component steps. (Three to five steps is a good number; more than that may signal that the new learning is complex enough to warrant more than one lesson.)
- Tell the students how many steps will be involved. (“I’m going to tell you how to do this job in three simple steps.”)
- Present the steps both orally and visually to meet the needs of children with different modality strengths, and to provide extra reinforcement. I like to write the steps one at a time on a transparency as I talk about them. (Later I transfer what I’ve written onto a large chart for display in the classroom, or onto sheets of paper so everyone can have their own copies.)
- State the steps as clearly as possible. Do this by using short sentences devoid of complicated jargon and multiple clauses. Begin each sentence with a verb. Number the steps so that students will understand the sequence and recognize the transitions: “1. Write a topic sentence that includes the name of the character and his or her important trait.”

If the steps to achieve the goal are not identified, students’ replication of the process will occur more by hit-or-miss than by actual design, even when subsequent lesson components are solid. The most perceptive students in the class will hit the target intuitively; the rest will most likely miss it, for they never understood in the first place what they were supposed to do.

Modeling: Showing Students How to Reach Their Goal

Based on my observations, many teachers appear to believe that *explaining* is synonymous with *instruction*. But good instruction does not end with a good explanation. When the extent of the instruction is *only* an explanation, without modeling or guided practice, teachers have no idea whether or not students understand the lesson content until it’s too late. Just hearing or reading the directions is not enough for most middle-grade learners. Despite your best

efforts, cries of “I don’t get it” may echo throughout the classroom from frustrated kids (and teachers) who already feel like failures before they’ve even begun the assignment. This kind of panic can be eliminated with attention to the next step in explicit instruction: modeling.

Modeling offers children the opportunity to watch the process unfold before their eyes. Modeling means that the teacher engages in whatever is involved in the learning task *exactly* as students will be expected to perform it. It is so important that the model adheres to the steps delineated in the explanation and maps directly onto the learning task.

While this may seem obvious, it is not always what happens in a classroom. I have watched teachers provide great step-by-step explanations, and then ignore these criteria with their own model. I have watched teachers do fabulous demonstrations of a lesson in, for example, editing for correct punctuation. Then they hand students a follow-up activity sheet that may draw upon the same concept, but approaches the task from an entirely different perspective. Modeling is the visual (and sometimes oral) link between the explanation that precedes it, and the students’ guided application of the process, which will follow.

I find that I am able to use the modeling portion of the lesson most meaningfully when students are gathered around me and not dispersed throughout the classroom at their desks. We feel like a group then. Although I need to do a large percentage of the talking, I want to be able to connect with the kids, to see their eyes (alert and focused, or adrift and glazed-over). I want their informal input as often as possible, which may be as subtle as a flickering smile to show me they’re “getting it,” or a hand raised tentatively to ask a question. It may *seem* that the teacher is doing most of the work during modeling, but this is *not* a spectator sport. Good teachers find lots of little ways to bring children into the process to keep them actively involved. A few of these ways include:

- Asking students to underline a portion of text on the chalkboard or overhead transparency — the topic sentence, a supporting quote, a detail that tells where or when, etc.
- Asking students to tell you what kind of punctuation to use at the end of a sentence: “Am I asking or telling here? What kind of punctuation should we use?”
- Asking students to suggest a synonym for a word you’ve included in the response: “ ‘Winnie-the-Pooh was fat.’ Can anyone think of a more interesting describing word?”

- Asking students to check the text for you because you need to prove...
- Asking students to read the completed response aloud with you to make sure it sounds good and makes sense. Then ask for possible revisions.

Without such active involvement, modeling will not achieve its intended purpose.

Guiding a Little or a Lot

I like graphic organizers and frames, because they work! It's easy for teachers to find or create templates to match nearly any format that students need. These templates simplify the task of representing knowledge on paper by providing graphic cues. Graphic organizers and frames are helpful *instructional aids* that assist children in moving quite securely from teacher-control of the lesson, toward their own independent application of the new learning.

Graphic organizers are not, however, a *substitute* for instruction — which is sometimes the way they are used! When students receive a graphic organizer or frame to complete for a text selection without sufficient explanation or modeling *beforehand*, they have no idea *why* they are using that particular format for their literature response.

To complicate matters, students are often successful with the graphic because it is so carefully guided. Teachers, of course, are elated to see such promising performance and expect this expertise to translate into high test scores on comparable material. Unfortunately, this is an unreasonable expectation.

If students are to do well on a task in a testing situation, (in this case, respond to open-ended comprehension questions) they need to have *heard* the explanation, *seen* the model, *practiced* with the organizer or frame as many times as needed — and then worked backward, removing one support at a time. After enough trials with the graphic aid, the teacher should take that away and expect children to be able to answer the question with just a review of the model and the answer criteria. Eventually, the model should disappear, as well, and at some point, even the answer criteria should not be needed. When students are capable of responding to the question all by itself without the benefit of instructional supports, that's when they're truly independent. That's when they're ready for the test, for on the test all they will get to guide them is “the question.”

Putting It All Together

With explicit instruction, teachers have a great deal of responsibility to monitor students' needs and provide the kind of scaffolding most appropriate at any point throughout the learning process. But students have a responsibility, too. They must realize that at some point they will be expected to perform the task *by themselves* and they should, thus, work systematically toward achieving that goal.

At the outset of any lesson — before I explain, before I model, before I distribute the organizer or frame — I make this shared responsibility clear to the students: “I’m going to teach you how to write a good answer to this question. First I’ll *tell* you what to do. Then I’ll *show* you how to do it. Then what do you think I’ll expect you to do?” They quickly discern that they will need to produce something themselves. “So while I’m teaching you, what should you be doing?” The consensus is “pay attention.” “Yes,” I affirm directing their attention toward *purposeful* learning: You should be thinking about how *you* will write *your* answer when it’s *your* turn.”

The following graphic illustrates this model of explicit instruction which is used here to teach written response to text. The instructional supports in Part Two of this book adhere to this instructional model (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1

The Explicit Teaching of Written Response to Text

Explicit Teaching

The question
↓
Setting the stage for learning
↓
Explaining (Telling)
↓
Modeling (Showing)
↓
Practicing (Guiding a little or a lot)
↓
Quality student response

The question
↓
Setting the stage for learning
↓
Explaining (Telling)
↓
Modeling (Showing)
↓
Quality student response

The question
↓
Setting the stage for learning
↓
Explaining (Telling)
↓
Quality student response

Student Independence

The question
↓
Setting the stage for learning
↓
Quality student response

The question
↓
Quality student response